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ABSTRACT

Comedy is the middle ground upon which the absurd and the serious meet. Concerned with illuminating pain, human imperfection, and man's failure to measure up to his own or the world's concept of perfection, comedy provides "an escape, not from truth but from despair." If tragedy says that some ideals are worth dying for, comedy asserts with equal seriousness that the value of life lies in the living of it. The comic vision, however, as utilized in the tragedy and comedy of Shakespeare, takes on a unique function, serving to heighten rather than relieve tension. Such is the effect in "Romeo and Juliet" of the death of Mercutio (the comic man) which prefigures the pain and destruction to come. The diminution of Antony in "Antony and Cleopatra" renders him implicitly comic, at the same time creating a tension between what the character is and what he becomes once his tragic nature begins to dominate. Finally, and most complex, is the use of an ominous and ugly sexuality to create the tone in "Measure for Measure," which ends in an uneasiness just beneath the surface. The use of the comic spirit is one way to help students discover relevance in Shakespeare, for today's age often seems to turn tragedy into comedy. (MF)

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SHAKESPEARE: FINDING AND TEACHING THE COMIC VISION

Michael L. Lasser

While I confess to a reasonably literate upbringing, I did not meet Shakespeare until what I now consider to be fairly late. In the ninth grade I was taught by a quiet, friendly maiden aunt of an English teacher who happened to know something about Shakespeare and how to teach him. We did *The Merchant of Venice,* of course, and I was more or less content to read the tragedy of Shylock and "The quality of mercy," to follow the adventure story lurking behind the romance, and to take my chances with Elizabethan English in a relatively casual way. One morning, however, I noticed the title page—*The Merchant of Venice,* it read, a comedy by William Shakespeare. Why, I asked, is the play a comedy when, except for Launcelot Gobbo, it isn't funny. Because, my teacher explained, it has a happy ending. Her answer was correct; no one doubts the conventional importance to comedy of the happy ending, despite the recent ambiguities of plays like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* or Ionesco's *Rhinoceros.* But her answer was as unsatisfactory as it was correct, and I, who was being raised every bit as much by radio and, suddenly, television as by books, and who as a result knew that comedy was funny, began to wonder in a negative way about Shakespeare.

The point of this minimal venture into autobiography is not that my teacher was ignorant (she was not) or that I eventually grew beyond the jokes of Milton Berle on Tuesday nights (I trust I have) or even that comedy has not received anywhere near as much critical, scholarly, philosophical, or educational attention as tragedy (we all know it hasn't). My point is that Miss Horn and most of the rest of us were taught implicitly and in rapid passing on our way to something more important, that comedy was usually contemporary rather than universal, that it dealt with the commonplace rather than the exalted, that it was funny and thus not worthy of serious attention, that it was frequently bawdy and therefore unsuitable for class, and that—unlike tragedy—it was merely a mode of expression or a way of attention-getting or a formula for commercial success.

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Tragedy, it was further implied, was a lofty vision of the world; comedy was an opiate for the illiterate.

Tragedy does, of course, have numerous modes, most of which overlap in part. The dramatic mode of *Oedipus Rex* does overlap that of Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope;* the philosophical mode of Aristotle does overlap the critical modes of Northrop Frye and Richard Sewall. These modes and the techniques they employ are not tragedy, however, but only the forms which the writer may use to express his tragic vision. Tragedy itself is a perception of reality, of one man's attempt to make meaning of his existence. Whether the hero's particular predicament is Oedipal or Lomanesque, we have always a tragic hero of virtue enough for us to empathize with him, a figure weakened by his character flaws or errors in judgment, driven by excessiveness or obsession, and pursued by some outside force over which he has no control. Struggling to find himself and his way, forced by his nature and his predicament to make impossible choices, he asserts his humanity and its ultimate value through his struggling only to fall because of his own failure. He may be destroyed but never defeated.

Likewise, the modes of comedy we observe should lead us back to the comic vision, to a different view of reality and another profound struggle to make sense of the human condition. Concerned with human imperfection, with our failure to measure up to our own or the world's conception of excellence, with pain, comedy provides us with a middle way to view the world. Comic man is often defeated but he is only rarely destroyed. While we can observe generally that tragedy is idealistic and comedy skeptical, that tragedy shows us man aspiring to more than he can achieve whereas comedy shows him pretending to more, that tragedy celebrates a man's capacity to aspire and suffer, whereas comedy celebrates his capacity to endure, nonetheless, comedy is not tragedy's opposite. James Thurber sets comedy's middle way when he observes: "Human dignity, the humorist believes, is not only silly but a little sad. So are dreams and conventions and illusions. The fine brave fragile stuff that men live by. They look so swell, and go to pieces so easily."

If comedy is this middle way, its identity derives in large measure from Plato's observation, "At a comedy the soul expresses a mixed feeling of pleasure and pain." Man, in other words, exults in his superiority to the animals and regrets his inferiority to the gods; he feels pleasure at his successes and pain at his failures—and comedy records both. Perhaps the Greeks at least unconsciously understood this necessary relationship between the two for, as Northrop Frye reminds us,

comedy derives from the same kind of monomythic fertility ritual as tragedy. The primitive sacrifices disappear as the religion becomes more formalized and abstract. Centuries pass until we come finally to the dramatic tetralogies of the Great Dionysiad. Perhaps it is not accidental—though it was probably unconscious—that the celebration began with the tragic trilogy and concluded with the comic satyr play. This arrangement of the four part unit, deriving as it does from the original fertility ritual and presented each year with the vernal equinox, suggests to Frye that a tragedy may be seen as an unfinished comedy, its power to move us to a sense of man's capacity for grandeur notwithstanding, and that true comedy must logically contain at least the seeds of tragedy within it. In simple though universal terms, the pioneers trapped by marauding Indians worry us terribly until the cavalry's bugle call to charge brings us to our feet and to the happy ending. The man who slips on the banana peel is funny until we see the blood rush from his mouth, until we recognize the man as our father, until the pleasure is replaced by pain. The ritual from which both modes derive centers first on the sacrifice of the sun-king, a re-enactment of the death of the sun and of the world which comes each year with the first frost. Then, finally, the ritual culminates with the king's rebirth. There is always the cosmic horror of the tragic fall, but there is also the humane hopefulness of the happy ending; the world is reborn each spring, and so is man's capacity for hatred and for love. The ultimate triumph, from which comedy takes its being, is in rebirth after pain: tragedy tells us, among other things, that there are ideals in the world worth dying for; comedy tells us with equal seriousness that the value of life lies in the living of it.

The comic writer must possess, then, an awareness of our common humanity and a sense of his own limitations. To lack either is to be in danger of moving even beyond cynicism to misanthropy. Not to recognize man's and one's own limitations is probably to move at the very least from comedy to superficiality to sentimentality. There must be an awareness and even a faith to make the ending happy, however, for comedy's ultimate purpose is neither to sympathize nor to scorn, but *to know*. Christopher Fry, in an appealing essay entitled "Comedy," observes: "Comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair. It believes in a universal cause for delight, even though knowledge of the cause is always twitched away from under us, which leaves us to rest on our own buoyancy. In tragedy every moment is eternity; in comedy eternity is a moment. In tragedy we suffer pain; in comedy pain is a fool, suffered gladly." In mythic terms, the Fall of Man is tragic, but only with that Fall is comedy pos-

sible—only with the eating of the fruit of the tree of *knowledge* can man know himself, know his world, know his limitations, know that he is free to be man, and discover the pain and the pleasure which accompany that freedom. The constant in this free comic world is the comic spirit—no matter how often we are knocked down, we manage to pull ourselves up and keep going. It is an act of will as if in tribute to our belief that what we do, that our living, that life itself, has value. This despite the ludicrousness of our vanities and follies. The absurd and the serious meet, and on the middle ground between stands comedy in full possession of the incongruous, and bolstered by regiments of absent-minded professors and beautiful ladies with squeaky voices busy at their task of falling short of divinity.

At this point exactly, comedy moves startlingly close to tragedy. After all, the greatest comic figures can hardly be thought of apart from their personal tragedies—consider Falstaff, Shylock, Don Quixote, and Shaw's Saint Joan. For the greatest comedies, the deepest expressions of the comic spirit, do deal with the disillusion of man, with his failure to realize his most passionate desires. Comedy gives us nothng in return for our loss, however; we have our life and that is what there is. Tragedy moves us to see life as rich and meaningful despite the pain and the horror. We see man stronger than the chains of his mortality; we are freed by moving outside the life of the senses to a life of imaginative reality. Comedy, on the other hand, makes daily life livable despite our follies and disillusionments. It laughs as much at the spirit as at the flesh. It refuses to take sides. It creates, instead, a third realm, a middle ground, which may be staked out only by the creative power of the imagination, by the humane and affirmative act of acceptance. Tragedy, to be sure, has depth, revelation, and grandeur, but comedy, to repeat, is not its opposite. It records man's dual nature, it gives us a view of life as neither angelic nor bestial, but as it is in that rich plural middle ground most of us occupy most of the time. Through comedy we may look at life coldly, but that view is always qualified by a ready sympathy freed from terror or too strong a dose of pity: the imaginative, compassionate, healing sanity of laughter.

Comedy, in brief, is criticism. It shows us as we are, not as we profess to be. It is, after all, legitimate to ask how much idealism is free from self-love, how much affection from flattery, how much goodness from guilt. Comedy raises these questions; it is the enemy not of virtue but of hypocrisy and pretense. Beyond criticism, comedy is also that understanding which is hopefully the goal of knowledge and beyond which lies wisdom.

It comforts us with the knowledge that most men are no better than we; it makes us more critical but it leaves us more tolerant. And thus it has a social function. To the degree that comedy leads us freely to knowledge and understanding of self and of the world, it is nothing less than a high form of moral enlightenment, and for all its laughter a matter of profound seriousness.

II

In my remaining time I wish to point to three plays, one of which, *Romeo and Juliet,* is taught frequently, and two of which, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Measure for Measure,* I believe should be. My goal is not complete analysis but what I hope is illustration of the essential role the comic vision plays in Shakespeare. Perhaps the best place to find and teach this comic vision—for our purposes in the secondary schools, anyway—is in the tragedies and the dark comedies. We have all taught the notion of comic relief in tragedy and properly so. The role of comedy in *Romeo and Juliet,* however, is not one essentially of escapism but of tension for the purposes of deepening Romeo's tragic commitment and our perception of it. Act One, Scene One is often omitted by the teacher because of its bawdry (I might note here that our juniors and seniors—and now many of our sophomores—are going to see Bergman's *Skammen,* the brilliant Czech film, *The Fifth Horseman is Fear,* Bunuel's *Belle de Jour,* and other films of quality which use partial or total nudity tastefully and meaningfully, while many of us are reluctant to have them discuss a pun on maidenheads). The realistic and comic coarseness of Samson and Gregory provides our introduction to the Veronese community which Romeo and Juliet will reject for what is in their eyes a higher reality. Through Samson and Gregory we begin to recognize the pluralism and contrast without which our understanding of the play and its tragedy would be incomplete. We begin to see the self-destructive power and influence of the Capulets and Montagues, the theme of the many faces of love which permeates the play, and the feud and its corrupting influence on Verona. It is the image of the worm-bitten bud which stands as a figurative equivalent of the lovers' doom. Who is to say that the flower's dark canker is not as much Verona—Samson and Gregory's city—as it is the fate which pursues Romeo and Juliet. Who is to say that the lovers are not as much threatened by reality as by the gods. For Romeo and Juliet are truly alone in this play.

We can first recognize in Scene One the comic world of waking, of daylight, of practicality, and of frivolity as the field against which the tragedy is played. The world of order is as

much a nightmare for the young lovers as the world of disorder: Lady Capulet resents her daughter's love for the Nurse; the Nurse advises Juliet to betray Romeo and marry Paris despite her marriage vows; Capulet threatens Juliet harshly if she will not obey his commands to marry. Moreover, no one can understand or reach Romeo and Juliet, and they are the first in Verona to create the new realm of love's order. Romeo in love with Rosaline creates an artificial, disordered, even neurotic world:

> But all so soon as the all-cheering sun
> Should in the farthest East begin to draw
> The shady curtains from Aurora's bed,
> Away from light steals home my heavy son
> And private in his chamber pens himself,
> Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out,
> And makes himself an artificial night.

In love with Juliet, he rejects his nightmares for a whole new world with a completeness and an order all its own:

> What light through yonder window breaks?
> It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!
> Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon.

Yet it is the comic world's intrusive, attention-getting presence which keeps Romeo and Juliet and their audience at least partly anchored in reality until almost the end—Juliet is torn between her love for Romeo and her grief at Tybalt's death; Romeo uses money and cleverness to seduce the poor apothecary; the audience grieves to see Mercutio a corpse. Moreover, it is largely the background reality of comedy which keeps Romeo and Juliet, themselves, from sinking heavily into sentimentality and self-pity, and thereby rendering their own story unbelievable. This is not a sentimental play; even Friar Lawrence acts to snap Romeo out of his self-indulgent tantrums. If love is the name of Romeo and Juliet's world, then a punning, violent lust first identifies their foes' world. After jesting about rape, Samson speaks sinisterly though Shakespeare manipulates him bawdily: "My naked weapon is out," Samson says, "quarrel, I will back thee." Thus, we have at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet* a bawdy scene designed initially to entertain the audience and engage its attention at once, but one which fulfills as well an important organic function in the play.

Eventually we must discover the comic center of the play in the person of Mercutio. A man of enormous verbal imagination, his words sparkle with comic meaning especially in the brilliant "Queen Mab" speech. Intelligent, witty, and self-indulgent, he thinks he knows exactly what is wrong with Verona and with Romeo. He is against pretense, though he probably confuses idealism with it; he is a critical spirit who thinks hmself free.

But because his comic nature criticizes what it also accepts and participates in—the society of Verona—Mercutio is no more free than Romeo. He can be objective about his friend's strange malady because he is free from love and dreams, but not about the feud. Locked in to the city's elegant decadence by his taste for luxury and to the feud by his friendship for Romeo, Mercutio accepts life as he finds it and although he knows better—and thus he dies. This kinsman of the Priince ignores his cousin's admonitions against the feud, and sides with his friend against what his common sense should tell him. He rejects Romeo's dreams precisely because they are dreams, "begot of nothing but vain fantasy, / Which is as thin of substance as the air." He fights Tybalt and dies because honor and the feud are part of the waking world as he has learned it to be. He has nothing better to do and no cause to commit himself to. His comic limitation is that this is the only world he can know. Preferring this reality to appearance or to dream, he lives comically and, ironically, dies the same way:

> *Romeo.* Courage, man. The hurt cannot be much.
>
> *Mercutio.* No, 'tis not so deep as a well, not so wide as a church door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man.

Romeo's momentary return to the daylight world after Mercutio's death, culminating in Tybalt's murder, suggests convincingly the closeness of their friendship and Mercutio's influence on his younger, less-experienced friend. Their views of the world have come to be in direct conflict, however. Romeo, who builds a night-time world of dream with Juliet, tells him, "Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace! / Thou talk'st of nothing," and Mercutio replies, "True, I talk of dreams." In the implicit conflict between these two friends, Shakespeare is moving us toward a direct confrontation between tragic man and comic man. Romeo has grown from self-delusive love for Rosaline all the way to the tragic commitment: without Juliet there can be no life. Mercutio would answer characteristically, without life there is no life. But this sort of confrontation is not central to the play's concern as announced in the Prologue. Shakespeare knew and we know that Mercutio may not convince Romeo; Romeo will be truly tragic only if he is free to choose his fate. Mercutio must therefore be removed; probably he must be either discredited or killed. Responding as much to Romeo's apparent cowardice as to Tybalt's challenge, Mercutio is fatally stabbed when Romeo intercedes in the duel. Lying in the street, he curses Romeo for acting idealistically rather than common-sensibly; he curses the two great houses for the murderous "plague" they have brought to the city. Shocked into awareness by his im-

pending death, Mercutio recognizes his limitations and those of mankind, and learns that his acceptance of the daytime world, of reality consistent witih the comic vision, has destroyed him. But Mercutio's death has shown us the destruction of a comic figure directly in the face of what I noted earlier about comic characters' good survival records. *Romeo and Juliet* is not a comedy, however: Mercutio's death represents the removal of the comic spirit, it marks the termination of common sense and restraint in the play, and it prefigures in violent action and raging lanlanguage the irrationality, the pain, and the destruction that its removal helps release. The tragedy may proceed. Shakespeare uses comedy, then, not basically to relieve tension, but to create it In the tragedies, comedy appears unconsciously as a device to remind us that all tragedy points ahead implicitly to its completion in comedy, and deliberately as a device to emphasize the play's essential tragedy.

III

Likewise, in a play I wish were taught more often than it is, *Antony and Cleopatra,* Shakespeare uses comedy to heighten the tragic intensity by diminishing Antony until he must finally be resurrected verbally by his beloved Cleopatra. This elevation through language is entirely apt in this most verbal of plays. The diminution of the tragic hero early in the play is fairly common in Shakespeare's tragedies. As a result, the hero is rendered more believable, more realistic, more recognizable than otherwise—and more implicitly comic. While it cannot be said of the Greeks, it can be said of both Elizabethan and modern drama that many tragedies cannot be tragic until they are first comic; the tragic hero chooses to throw off limitations once accepted. Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia is a bawdy and bitter pun—bawdy and bitter, in that order: "Get thee to a nunnery." Jack Jefferson struts and mugs outrageously, enjoying his success in the first scenes of *The Great White Hope.* Only later does he make the impossible choice, the tragic decision to transcend human limitation. Overage and overweight, a fugitive from justice, wounded beyond cure by the suicide of his mistress, he screams out of the self-destructive agony he embraces: "Set dat fuckin fight up! Ah take it now!" The ugliness and the horror of that line surely reside in part in our memory of strutting, cocky, cake-walking, comic Jack Jefferson, heavyweight champion of the world. Likewise, Shakespeare creates in his diminution of Antony a tension between what the character is and what he becomes once his tragic nature begins to dominate. This contrast also helps to intensify the drama immediately before and

after the tragic fall. There are in fact three implicit conflicts in the development of Antony's character leading to his final nobility: between the doting, semi-comic, diminished hero of Acts One and Two, and the tragic hero of Act Three; between the tragic hero, and the fallen hero of Act Four; and between the fallen hero, and the *resurrected* hero of Act Five. We are, in other words, a good deal closer to comic completeness at the end of this play than in *Romeo and Juliet.* While there is implicit rebirth after pain, however, it does not occur in this world as it must in comedy.

Antony is a middle-aged politician who still dotes on his mistress after ten years of love-making and general irresponsibility. Antony's loss of his position, his power, even his own manhood eventually drives the loyal Enobarbus from him and hands the final military authority to Cleopatra whose inexperience helps to doom them all. Poor Antony cannot even commit suicide without help. Moreover, his suicide is caused as much by Cleopatra's desparate practical joke to test his love one more time as it is by his defeat at the hands of the Romans. It would not take a great deal of work to turn his suicide attempt into the blackest of comedies. For all his foolishness, however, there is no question about his tragic height when Cleopatra describes him after his death: "His legs bestrid the ocean, his reared arm / Crested the world."

Cleopatra, herself, grown in dignity through loss and through new commitment, chooses Antony's way to die rather than submit to Caesar. We may have questioned her wisdom from time to time but never the depth of her pride. Earlier, her courtiers were amused by her bawdy badinage and game-playing. To the eunuch, Mardian's, question of how he may please her, she replies, "I take no pleasure in aught an eunuch has." Everyone laughs; the queen has made a joke and it is funny. Moreover, they are suddenly rendered superior to her because she cannot hide from them her anguished vulnerability created by love for Antony; laughter, we have been informed, may result from a sudden sense of one's superiority to another. But laughter is also a form of self-recognition and sympathy for another; it may heal as well as deride. The joke and the ensuing laughter, like the later cowardice of the Egyptian navy, do much to identify the world ruled by Cleopatra. A world based on emotion, directness of speech, indulgence, and the cult of personality, it stands in obvious contrast to Rome, with its identifying qualities of political intrigue, an overt reliance on both reason and militarism, and a desire for worldly power. It is Antony that Cleopatra embraces in her suicide, but Rome's real world that she defiies.

Immediately before her death scene, Cleopatra sends for the asp to place on her breast. In still another comic scene, it is brought by a clown, of all people, who prescribes it with a caution: ". . . his biting is immortal; those that do die of it do seldom or never recover." His sardonic observations heighten the tension as we await Cleopatra's symbolic reunion with Antony, as we are reminded of her essential mortality and the immortality she seeks, and as we recognize the audacious presence of comedy which through sharp contrast deepens our sense of Cleopatra's commitment to her love. The early comic scenes at court, decadent, bawdy, and indulgent, named Cleopatra as earthy and erotic, though deeply in love; now her passion carries her beyond the mortal limits of "recovery":

> Give me my robes, put on my crown, I have
> Immortal longings in me. . . .
> Husband, I come.

IV

Aside from the happy ending which some find inconsistent with the substance and the tone of the rest of the play, *Measure for Measure* is as dark a play as any Shakespeare wrote. While the happy conclusion may be necessary to keep this comedy of the base life from following its natural movement toward disaster, its spirit emerges most clearly in the view of mankind expressed by the ascetic and deeply religious Isabella in Act Two:

> . . . man, proud man,
> Dressed in a little brief authority,
> Most ignorant of what he's most assured—
> His glassy presence—like an angry ape
> Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
> As makes the angels weep.

Filled with a sinister and deceptive atmosphere of apparent idealism but real pretense, apparent virtue but real vice, apparent integrity but real corruption, *Measure for Measure* is the most modern of Shakespeare's comedies, one of the most troubling of plays, and one of the most rarely presented—unfortunately. In its setting in Vienna, a city even more corrupt than Romeo's Verona; in its use of an ominous and ugly sexuality to create tone, a method not unknown to modern writers like William Burroughs and John Updike, among others; in its characters who choose not only the practical to the ideal, but the secular life to the religious; in its illustration of the arrogance of power, *Measure for Measure* is a comic and frightening study of evil which deserves to be read and studied, its profane humor notwithstanding. If one is willing to fight for the student's right

to read and the teacher's freedom to teach, here, I would suggest, is a work well worth the battle.

Like many modern views of reality, *Measure for Measure* begins ambiguously and ends the same way. While its title suggests, theoretically, the kind of middle ground between extremes which comedy occupies and, more immediately, a play ruled by the hard justice of "an eye for an eye," the play ends with a merciful pardon for all but one. Each has failed himself or another along the way, none has been true to his highest ideal, but each has also learned something of humility and a sense of his own humanity—its powers and its limits. They all seem better able and more willing than before to face the world; they will be able to get by. Committed to the religious life and about to enter a convent, the beautiful Isabella must come to the defense of her brother, Claudio. When she is forced to choose between his life and her virtue, she chooses the abstract, ideal, Christian value: her brother may die but she will remain a virgin. Only later does the Duke, paradoxically disguised as a friar, introduce her to the appealing complexities of this world, and manage to save both Claudio and her chastity at the same time. Her high idealism may be well-regarded by some, but by the time the play ends her place is clearly in the world.

Angelo, the rigid moralist who rules in the Duke's alleged absence, reveals his comic and human inability to live by his ideals when he bargains for Isabella's chastity. He is savable at the end not simply because he is chastened and then learns to be conventionally good, but because his absolute standards become relative and because his hypocrisy was based on self-deception and human weakness rather than on cold, calculating evil. He speaks to himself in amazement:

> Never could the strumpet
> With all her double vigor, art and nature,
> Once stir my temper; but this virtuous maid
> Subdues me quite. Ever till now,
> When men were fond, I smiled and wondered how.

Aloof and disciplined, he is as much the naif as Isabella, the girl he would seduce. As a result he cannot sustain his lofty view of himself at the moment of crisis. Once he is exposed and contrite, he may begin to grow toward a more tolerant humanity.

The Duke is perhaps the most cynical of all in this darkest of plays. Supposedly concerned about the moral well-being of his city but unwilling to enforce unpopular laws, he invites Angelo to rule with absolute power while he lurks secretively in the background to observe and to intercede as necessary; he is a self-serving and frequently cruel *deus ex machina.*

Strangely enough, the play is extremely funny in parts. The bawdry is based not on sexual joy, however, but on infidelity, whoring, and syphilis. Fornication is the commonplace on which the plots are built. Lucio, called a "fantastick" in the Dramatic Personnae, is a dark and humorous alternative to Feste, Ariel, and Puck. Creatures of the comic imagination, spontaneous spirits of joy and mischief, healers, they stand against Lucio who, for all his wit, is no more than a malicious liar. At the same time, however, he is the only one to speak harshly of the Duke, to remind us that Vincentio is indeed man and not God, that he, too, has lied from the beginning. And for this reminder Lucio is punished severely.

The ending of this comedy is unusually ambiguous; it retains its darkness until the final curtain. All of the characters but Lucio have found what appears at first to be a conventionally happy ending. For slandering the Duke, he must marry a whore, but Claudio will marry his Julietta, Mariana will have her Angelo, and the Duke seems to have convinced Isabella to share his throne. Despite this apparent restorative solution to all problems, however, there is an uneasiness just beneath the surface. First of all, in a play in which the happy ending results from the Christian pattern of contrition, confession, penance, and expiation, we find that Duke Vincentio is quite willing to play God in the process, that Isabella rather easily leaves the Church to marry him, and that certain selected sins of lying and adultery not only go unpunished but are actually rewarded. Secondly, none of the problems really has been solved; the moment of happiness may well be fleeting. For Vienna has not changed; the old corruptions continue; and Mistress Overdone could have said at the end of the play just as she had at the beginning: ". . . what with the war, what with the sweat, what with the gallows, and what with poverty, I am custom-shrunk."

This same unease has appeared all through *Measure for Measure.* In a world so dark, Claudio can be saved only by a *deus ex machina*—the substitution of the head of the recently-killed bandit, Ragozine, for Claudio's—even though the supposedly-omniscient Duke is busily at work. To encourage premarital sexuality and to commit the deadly sin of pride, the Duke chooses to wear of all things the garb of a holy friar. And Isabella, on the verge of taking her final vows, joins him easily in this work. The worthy Escalus, a figure of reason, restraint, and liberal morality, exercises not his integrity but his prudence. He fails in his attempt to influence Angelo, but we do understand how he has survived at the top all these years. We also have Pompey, the cynical clown; Frost, the gulled gentleman; Mis-

tress Overdone, the pitiable whore; and the kindly but still obedient Provost. Ultimately, he obeys orders—and we all know where that can get you. Finally, we have Barnardine, the condemned criminal who somehow postpones his execution by refusing to die while intoxicated. One should, after all, be acutely aware of one's life especially at its termination. His good-humored immorality, his refusal to fear or face death, and his boisterous demands on life provide an unusual and tense uneasiness—an unease similar to our more intense feeling at the end of the play. Barnardine lives on—he survives and then disappears from the play. But he can live only in prison and only so long as he remains drunk. The thought is hardly comforting.

When I reread this play recently, I recalled reading the response of Mike Nichols to some young people who were so pleased by what they saw as the happy ending to his enormously popular dark comedy, *The Graduate:* "People say the second half of the film is romantic. But it's not. It's setting up a trap. I think ten minutes after the bus leaves, the girl will say to him, 'My God, I have no clothes.' At least they're out of the terrible world they lived in, but they're not to be envied." We can say no more, I think, for the characters who inhabit *Measure for Measure.*

V

One of the latest bandwagons in education—hopefully a permanent one—carries the sign of relevance. Unfortunately, many seem to confuse this concern with a mindless, distorted pandering to the momentary passions of our endlessly faddish world. I might suggest, for example, that *Romeo and Juliet* is not at all a play about teenagers as we understand the term, that to teach it as such as to distort the integrity of Shakespeare's work and to fall into a sentimental trap, that what we might be doing is teaching both the play and Zefferelli's film adaption and then talking about the differences and their effect on the work and on us. The tragic vision of reality, I would suggest, has a much deeper relevance and is much more challenging to teach than any passing concern for the supposed state of Romeo's acne. One way to help our students discover this deeper relevance in Shakespeare is through the use of the comic spirit, for we live in an age which seems often to turn tragedy into comic gesture. To many, the essential quality of life today is its absurdity, its futility, at best its Sisyphian imperatives—all there is the rock and the mountainside and that damned endless pushing. Some would call this world profoundly tragic—Arthur Miller and Albert Camus, for example. Tragic or comic, notwithstanding, when we do

laugh at the world today, it is usually with lumps in our throats. The tragic and the comic often come together; we use comedy to view the dark side of the human soul. And few writers so well perceived that potential synthesis as Shakespeare.

I believe, in other words, that Shakespeare's view of the world is essentially tragicomic. By this I do not mean the original use of the term by which Dr. Johnson in his genre-bound age sought to explain Shakespeare's use of comic relief in the tragedies. I mean instead a true combination of the two, comedy and tragedy; I mean William Shakespeare's humane and affectionate regard for man, limited by his knowledge of man's capacity to do evil, heightened by his feeling for man's ability to do good and to forgive and to love, and deepened to the edge of sanity by his capacity to understand the essential tragic dignity of which man is capable. He gives us, then, man as he is. And he gives him to us, finally, fittingly, and in summary in his last comedy. *The Tempest* may have a metaphoric title, a fantastic storm as its beginning, and a whole tone of poetic unreality, but its ending of forgiveness, young love, and restoration is a reassertion of man, again, as he is. At the end of the play, we leave a Prospero who will think of death, of his limits and his end, but also a Prospero who has exchanged his magic for his reason, his wizardry for his humanity; who has freed Ariel to live in his own realm of spirit; who has restored his enemies to themselves:

> My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,
> And they shall be themselves;

and finally a Prospero who has introduced his daughter to the world from the magic unreality of the Enchanted Isle. He closes his life well only because he brings new life into the world. He is not William Shakespeare, but certainly his mission of restoring, of healing, of bringing the nearly-tragic night through to comic dawn—certainly his mission is the same.

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